

Montreal's golden age

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Between the mid-nineteenth century and the Great Depression of the twentieth, Montreal was transformed from a small colonial town into Canada's leading metropolis. Waterworks, telephone, gas and electrical systems were laid, the Lachine canal was widened and deepened, and the port installations completely rebuilt and greatly expanded. The Victoria Bridge crossing the mighty St Lawrence River was completed in 1860 and the transcontinental railways spanned the nation by the late 1880s, which opened up the west and created new markets. People flocked into the city from the countryside to work in the burgeoning industries, to be joined by ever increasing numbers of immigrants.

From a population of about 60,000 in 1851, the city more than doubled by 1881, but more rapid growth was to follow. By 1931 the urban area reached one million, making it Canada's first metropolis.* The *fin de siècle* was marked by exuberant growth for the transportation hub of the nation: banks, commercial and office buildings, almost every sort of manufacturing industry, hotels, clubs and department stores were built. The commercial centre of the city moved from the old walled city close to the waterfront up the hill to St Catherine Street. The mountain was preserved to become the city's major park. Faltering suburbs were annexed. Municipal corruption was rife. The elite developed enclaves of architect-designed housing in noble locations on the sides of the mountain while the working classes were crammed into tightly packed, stacked duplexes and triplexes situated as close as possible to manufacturing plants.

Change was not only in the built environment. As is well known, Montreal had a French Catholic foundation. The nineteenth-century wave of entrepreneurs was largely Anglo-Scottish, and investment in development was largely through British portfolio capital. By the turn of the century American influences were becoming important through investment, the opening of branch plants and the introduction of new inventions such as the cinema. There were of course tensions in all this,

* Robert Lewis, *Manufacturing Montreal: The Making of an Industrial Landscape, 1850 to 1930*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xvii + 336pp. 40 figures. 20 maps. 23 tables. Bibliography. \$45.00 cloth.

Isabelle Gournay and France Vanlaethem (eds), *Montreal Metropolis, 1880–1930*. Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company in association with the Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1998. 222pp. 124 illustrations. Bibliography. \$39.95 pbk.

for instance manifested in a French-speaking *Chambre de Commerce* and an English-speaking Board of Trade. The American influence exerted modern values which were far from universally appreciated.

It is against this backdrop that both these books have been written. Robert Lewis's *Manufacturing Montreal: The Making of an Industrial Landscape, 1850 to 1930* is built on an adaptation of his Ph.D. thesis in geography at McGill University. (He now teaches historical geography at the University of Toronto.) Its aim is to trace the dynamics of industrialization – including increasing specialization, the uneven development of technology, the labour process, the organization of firms, the suburbanization of industry – and its multiplier effects, with regard to infrastructure, housing and the fashioning of urban space. In addition, the book compares the industrialization of Montreal with other North American cities.

The starting point is a meticulous examination of the location of industry for three time horizons, 1861, 1890 and 1929, using as a primary source the unique water-tax evaluation roll, which has miraculously survived for every year to the present day. The years were carefully selected: 1861 because it represents a turning point from craftwork to modern industry, 1890 because it is the year just before the recession of the early 1890s, and 1929 as the end of the boom years. This evidence was supplemented by extensive archival and trade journal research to fill out the process of change. Special attention was paid to selected industries: tobacco, clothing, metal working, carriage making, cotton, printing and paint manufacture.

Montreal Metropolis, 1880-1930, on the other hand, is a collection of essays produced in conjunction with an exhibition at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, edited by the curators, Isabelle Gournay of the School of Architecture at Maryland, and France Vanlaethem, a design professor at the University of Quebec in Montreal. It is, however, much more than an exhibition catalogue. It is a scholarly analysis of the city's architectural evolution during the glory years, which attempts 'to identify the agents, norms and social values that gave Montreal at the turn of the century its urban form and a distinctively metropolitan architecture' (p. 9).

The first five chapters set the scene. Anthony Sutcliffe starts off with a broad-brush definition of a metropolis, and situates Montreal within this global concept. Historian Paul-André Linteau follows with a thumb-nail sketch of the development of the city, laying out the issues and events with commendable elegance, brevity and clarity. Marcel Fournier and Veronique Rodriguez, both sociologists, examine the evolving urban culture of Montreal, looking at newspapers, theatre, cinema, literature, the arts, music and the development of universities. They demonstrate how urbanization resulted in clashes between traditional and modern values, clerical and liberal ideologies, and the

effects of growing Americanization on society, while showing how English and French cultural institutions were founded and grew up quite separately.

The fourth chapter, by geographer David Hanna, is a good treatment of the evolution of the transportation network, which was to prove the key to Montreal's prosperity. Starting in 1840, canal and harbour improvements, soon followed by railway penetration into the city – which involved the building of stations, terminals, hotels, shunting yards, bridges, railway shops for the manufacture and maintenance of locomotives, freight and passenger cars – changed the shape, form and character of the metropolitan area. Finally, historian Walter Van Nus looks at the development of suburbs, the new municipalities that multiplied during this period, each with its own distinctive character.

The next part of the book focuses on architecture. Four chapters on architects and their commissions, the contribution of American architects, beautification and modernization, and the emergence of large-scale forms, written alternately by Vanlaethem and Gournay, form the heart of the book. Beautifully illustrated, these chapters lead us through the development of architecture as a profession, the socialization of architects, the relationships between big business and architecture, the hiring of American firms for prestigious commercial ventures (while local French Canadian architects made their mark in the institutional and religious realms), the evolution of building controls, the attempts at planning, and the extension of the central area from the old city up the hill to Place d'Armes, Ste Catherine and Sherbrooke Streets.

The great strength of this book, compared to much architectural writing, is how it draws out the interrelationships between culture, economics, fashion and beliefs in 'progress'. The logic of capitalism, technological innovation and effusive boosterism are interwoven with the analysis of building siting and architectural design in a compelling and convincing manner. A most useful appendix gives brief profiles of the architects of the times.

In sum, two outstanding complementary books, both for Montreal lovers and for urban historians interested in comparative studies and methodologies. One omission to be noted, however, is the scanty treatment of the impact of the Great War. While *Montreal Metropolis* acknowledges a slowdown in construction in which 'only movie theatres and loft buildings seem to have been spared' (p. 116), *Manufacturing Montreal* does not broach the subject at all. This is strange, considering the fact that the production of war *matériels*, guns, tanks, boats, uniforms and the like, must have lined the pockets of some entrepreneurs, while military service would deprive them of labour.